

## **The Ambush**

“Are you afraid?” Shadow asked as the two of us walked through the jungle, his voice came as a whisper from behind me. I didn’t answer immediately, instead my hand reached for the wrist of my other, not finding what I was looking for. I caught myself, Saia was of course not there. She somewhere ahead of us, scouting for a good place to make an ambush. The fact that my hand moved almost unconsciously to try and touch her spoke volumes about how important she had become to me in such a short time.

My first instinct to his question was to say that I wasn’t afraid, but that was a lie. The tenets of the Heart of Azure and Scarlet taught me that emotion was not a burden, that it was not to be suppressed. So I answered truthfully. “Yes,” I said, not even trying to mask the fear in my voice.

I remembered the feeling I got when I looked at the sikiri the last time. The aura that gripped me, that sent me to the verge of panic. The memory of that encounter with the sikiri still haunted me—the chilling terror I had felt in the presence of the massive creature, the sinister hiss that had reverberated through my bones, and the sheer size and power it had displayed.

I remembered the feeling of helplessness as I hid in the hollow between the tree roots, the way the sikiri had effortlessly lifted the body of the okolon and made it disappear. I shuddered at the memory of its enormous, snake-like head looming above me.

“And what does your fear tell you?” Shadow asked.

I stopped and turned to look at him. I thought about it, letting my emotions flow through me. They were a natural response, my instincts giving me a warning. Humans had evolved over a course of millions of years, the evolution that had honed our bodies for one trait above all others, intelligence. I was no longer a human, but I shared a lot of their base qualities. What I did have now was the thirst, and it too had evolved over its existence. Its history might not be as explored or known, but I knew what purpose the thirst served. It had evolved for survival over everything else. It spoke to me through my human emotions, and my intelligence allowed me to understand and gain insight from it. The thirst sought the same goal it always did. To feed and to be the biggest predator around. That I felt fear, meant that even the thirst understood the danger that the sikiri presented.

I remembered the tenets, Emotion is the fuel that grants me Purpose. Our purpose was clear, to survive the jungle and reach the coast. Fate had taken the decision out of our hands, the sikiri would catch up to us, it was inevitable. The sikiri was in the way of us achieving that purpose. We would need to confront it, one way or another. The thought of facing the sikiri was terrifying, but not surprising, my fear did not mean letting it rule me.

“The sikiri is the most dangerous thing I have ever encountered,” I answered Shadow’s question with a conviction. “We shouldn’t face it head on, if we could, we shouldn’t face it at all. My fear tells me that fighting it head-on is death.”

Shadow nodded, his eyes piercing into mine. What he saw there, I couldn’t know, I could only hope that he approved. “An ambush, From

the Mist, Strike,” he said, quoting the name of the Veiled Mist Assault’s first Kata. “One should always strive to end the conflict as fast as possible, with overwhelming might if at all able.”

I agreed, it echoed some of the teachings that my sire tried to instill in me, what now seemed like it was in another life. “So, how do we do that?” I asked.

“We are likely facing a young sikiri, a mature one would have caught up to us by now. That is a boon for us, otherwise we would have no chance. From the way you describe the encounter, there are two possibilities. One, it has a terror skill, which will be an issue to deal with but not an insurmountable one. Or two... it is blighted, a monster.”

“Which is worse?” I asked, already suspecting the answer.

“If it is a monster, then it will be stronger than its Investment might suggest. Though it will also be... erratic. The blight is... it affects the mind and it feeds on negative emotions. Its presence will make you feel more deeply. If we encounter it, do not try to fight what you feel.”

I raised an eyebrow.

He heard the unspoken question and answered. “Hunting monsters is a difficult profession. Only a few ever become any good at it. This is because of the effect that monsters have on people, the way that they influence emotions, it plays tricks on the mind. To resist one needs a stalwart mind, forged by discipline practiced for decades. All monster hunters are taught how to control and suppress emotion. It is how they resist the effect the blight has on a person.”

I blinked. That sounded very different than what he had just told me to do.

He saw my expression, and one side of his mouth lifted into a wicked-looking grin. “You noticed that this is almost an exact opposite of what I and my school of being teach?”

“I did,” I answered. “I assume that there is a reason for that?”

He nodded in response. “What the blight does is not innately wrong. It just amplifies what is already there, it fans the flames of your emotions. Suppressing and controlling them works, but it also keeps so much more of it chained up inside. When such control slips, the outcome is far more destructive. My way is more dangerous, but if you learn to channel your emotions properly, then you will never have anything to fear from the blight. And we have no time to teach you how to guard your mind. So, let your emotions flow through you freely, feel deeply, but do not let them control you.”

I nodded. It wasn't like I had much choice. “How do we fight it?”

“The first step in any battle that you can choose, is picking the battlefield.”

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The ground trembled, and I grabbed hold of a nearby tree to steady myself. It ended as quickly as it started, and I glanced behind me to

check up on Shadow. His head was turned to the sky, looking through the gap in the canopy. I knew what was in that direction, what it was that he was looking at. I could assume what he was thinking about.

“You think that it’s connected to the tremors?” I asked as I grabbed a gourd from my waist. It was filled with blood of a bird-like creature I had hunted the day before, the same species as one of the first beasts that I had hunted in this place.

Shadow turned to look at me as I drank, then he sighed. “I do not know,” he answered. “We had never thought about it. The Blight Curtain existed here forever, as far as I know. And so had Ish Vimza suffered from the ground itself shaking. Yet, it has gotten worse of late. I assumed that the new Expansion, your arrival, had something to do with it. Or perhaps that it was a side-effect of something that the Grand Spell is doing. But now... After what I had seen in that vision... we are wrong about the nature of the blight. Perhaps there are things that we do not yet understand.”

There wasn’t anything for me to comment on, so I simply nodded and returned my eyes to the ground and the task at hand - preparing the quicksand trap. Saia had spent a day scouting ahead of us until she found the spot. According to Shadow, the quicksand was the best chance we had of taking the sikiri down.

We had spent almost an hour checking out the location afterward, and Shadow had finally agreed that this spot was the best we could hope to find before the sikiri caught up to us. It was a narrow stretch of path filled by the treacherous quicksand. We had been lucky in our search - not only did we find a spot with the right kind of terrain, but also one with some natural cover.

The path was surrounded by dense foliage that would force the sikiri to slow down and give us the advantage in combat. We grabbed as many vines and leaves from the jungle floor that we could, setting aside any stones and dirt to fill in the gaps. With Shadow's help, we used these items to cover up the quicksand patch. It's been a day since we started preparing, and the sikiri would've taken that time to catch up quickly. I just hoped that we had timed things properly.

Shadow was very good at making improvised traps, he had me felling down a tree and cutting out a large piece of its trunk as a trap. It had been a bitch and a half to move, but between the two of us we managed to wrap it up with vines and rope that he had among his gear, then pull it up into the air. Setting it up hidden behind one of the larger trees overlooking the quicksand. We also made sure to hide the rope so that the sikiri wouldn't notice. I didn't know how smart the monster was, but Shadow was taking no chances.

We continued working all around the ambush spot until even a seasoned eye would struggle to spot where danger lurked beneath our feet, or above our heads. We also hid away a few of his weapons, just in case we had to grab a new one quickly.

As I worked, my mind wandered to the sikiri. Would the trap be enough? I wondered. I couldn't help but feel a sense of unease about the upcoming confrontation. I didn't know how strong the sikiri actually was, but every instinct that I had screamed at me that facing it was death. I tried to push the fear aside and focus on the task at hand.

"Are you sure this will work?" I asked Shadow, looking up from my work.

He nodded confidently. "Yes. One does not survive for as long as I have without knowing how to hunt properly and adapt based on his prey." Then, he hesitated. "That being said. The sikiri is an apex predator. They are smart, and if this one is a monster... then our success will depend on the skills that it has and how good our ambush is. We need to make sure the bait is convincing enough, then strike fast and with no hesitation."

I nodded, remembering the lessons. "From the Mist, Strike," I said.

Shadow raised his head and met my eyes. The side of his mouth rose in a half-smile. "Yes, exactly. If we execute the plan well, we can kill it before it has the chance to do anything. Otherwise... I do not think that I could do more than use one of my stronger skills once. Perhaps a handful of my weaker ones."

The plan was made without needing to rely on Shadow and his power. I had seen how tired he got when he demonstrated skills for me when he was teaching me. If he was forced to do that, he was not going to be able to do much else after.

But, at least we had a plan in place. It was better than trying to outrun the monster when we had no hope of doing it.

As we finished setting up the trap, we waited for Saia to return, I had sent her ahead to keep an eye on the sikiri and let us know when it got close.

As we waited, I couldn't help but feel nervous. This was it, my first real encounter in this new world. A fight against an opponent that was powerful and had skills. I knew that Shadow was experienced, but I

couldn't shake off the feeling of dread that weighed heavily on my chest.

Nightfall approached, and some of my tension bled away with the setting of the sun, as my true nature awakened once again. We've tried to time it so that the ambush happened at night, when we would have the element of surprise on our side, and when we were at our strongest.

We knew that the sikiri would be heading straight for us, Saia and Shadow had tested it out, and it was as he had suspected. The sikiri was following him. As he said, it was most likely a skill it had.

Then, a glint of something reflective caught my eye and I raised my head to see Saia drop down through the trees.

"You're back," I said in relief. I was getting worried.

"Statement: The sikiri will arrive within the hour at its current pace."

"The time has come, then." Shadow's voice vibrated with intensity as he spoke. He approached me and firmly grasped my shoulder, his gaze piercing straight into my soul. His words penetrated deep within me, conveying a warmth that brought tears to my eyes. This man had been in my life for only a short time, yet he had become a teacher, a mentor. Circumstances forced us to work together, and somehow a trust was born between us.

The world was cruel, that we've met here in this place filled with so much danger.



With emotion swelling in his voice, he whispered, "No matter what lies ahead of us, I am thankful that our paths have crossed."

I gave him a small smile. "And so am I." In just a few days, he had given me lessons that I felt like I will be unraveling for the rest of my life. I didn't know if he understood exactly what it was that he had given me, the Heart of Azure and Scarlet was a step that had cemented my desire to discover my own purpose in life. To be something more than a servant of the cartel.

I didn't know what sharing his way of being meant to him fully, but I could tell that it had meant a lot to him as well.

He nodded, then turned his head to look in the distance, at the dark jungle ahead. "Let us begin, as we agreed," Shadow said. "I will go and lead it back here."

I took a deep breath, this part of their plan was the most uncertain. Shadow was weakened, and they didn't know how the sikiri would react if it saw him. But they also had to make sure that it fell into the trap, and Shadow was its target.

"I'll be ready," I told him, and he walked away, quickly disappearing into the jungle.

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I waited for what felt like eternity, time enough to reflect. My life was never perfect. It was always filled with strife, if I died today I would lament not getting a chance to do something with my life. But, at the same time, if I had to die, doing it on my own terms felt... good. I was dealt a bad hand, but I was the one that was playing it.

I looked around one last time, making sure that everything was ready. Saia was hidden above among the branches, waiting to strike. And I was kneeling next to the rope that held in place the giant log above me.

The silence of the jungle was broken by a low rumble that made my heart beat faster in anticipation of what would come next. The quicksand trap was nearly impossible to detect until you were right on top of it, I hoped that the sikiri would not have the time to notice. I waited silently, watching from my hiding place deep in the foliage as the sounds grew louder.

Then, finally I saw movement. Shadow ran through the jungle at a pace that was faster than even I could manage. I could barely track him, though what I could see clearly was what came behind him. A giant snake-like monster was crashing through everything in its way.

Seeing it immediately brought the same reaction as I had experienced last time. The all consuming terror that made even the thirist hesitate. This time I was ready for it, I didn't fight it, I accepted the fear for what it was, a warning from my instincts.

The sikiri's scales hit the dirt like a constant drum roll. In the silence of the jungle, it was a death march. A deep, rumbling shriek that was like the sound of a volcanic eruption. The monster's hiss was

a reverberating rumble that circled through the trees and came back to me, like the echoes of a thousand slithering tongues.

The moonlight above illuminated its passage, and let me see its form more clearly.

The sikiri was a giant serpent made of scales and muscle, with two tendrils swept back and dangling of its head. Its body was almost twice as wide as I was, and sharp shark-like teeth filled its mouth. It was grey like dirty snow, with dark green and brown patches. Its four eyes were the color of gold, bulbous and large, and it was hard to pinpoint where they were looking.

Then I caught traces of red over its scales. From what Shadow had said, it meant that the sikiri was blighted, but not yet fully a monster. If it was a monster, its eyes would've turned red. Still, it was a dangerous beast.

Shadow ran ahead of it and over the quicksand. Even knowing the plan, I felt fear rise up in me for a moment. There was of course no reason to. Sikiri followed Shadow as he whirled around and raised his serpent-tongue spear and yelled, challenging the beast. The sikiri hissed and snapped forward, I felt the move imprinted in the fabric of the world around me, in the Way. I knew that it was a skill, and I saw how quickly it moved, its maw opened, it flashed across the distance take a bite out of Shadow. Its mouth engulfed him, and the teeth snapped closed around his waist.

For a moment, I almost stood up, but then I saw Shadow's body fall apart into mist. An illusion.

The attack carried the sikiri forward, straight into the quicksand. It sank in, pushing the quicksand out of the pit in a small geyser of mud. It let out a hiss of rage and thrashed, but it was too late. The treacherous ground had taken hold of it, trapping the monster in place.

The real Shadow appeared at the other end of the trap, his weapon raised and ready. "Now!" He yelled and I turned. My kabar slicing through the rope tied to the root next to me.

A groaning sound came from above me as the tree log was set free, and it swung through the air. The sikiri raised its head above the quicksand as its lower body, the part of it that was out of the pit, tried to wrap itself around a tree and pull it out of the trap. Just in time for the log to come swinging straight at its head.

The bark shattered like glass as it splintered upon impact, sending wood chips shooting all over. I twitched my head out of the way as one of those shrapnel flew in my direction, I felt warmth on my face and knew that it had cut me. I ignored it, quickly sliding my kabar into its sheath and pulling the glaive from my back.

The sikiri was stunned, one of its eyes was a bleeding mess, and it kept shaking its head as if in a daze, it thrashed and pounded, trying to find a way forward, but was quickly being swallowed up by the quicksand. Shadow jumped forward, leaping over the pit and the beast.

His movements were graceful and precise, as if he had done this a thousand times. His nine tails fluttered behind him like ribbons as he soared through the air. He extended his arm and with a single, swift motion, unleashed his serpents-tongue spear. I felt an imprint on the

world, a skill activating, but I didn't hear what it was. My attention wasn't on that, but instead on what was happening in front of me.

His attack cut into the sikiri's head with dizzying speed, piercing its scales and gouging out a deep gash from the side of its snout to the rim of its eye. The creature let out a loud screech of pain and confusion, now blind in another eye, making its left side completely dark. Then Shadow somersaulted over to the other side of the trap, landing on solid ground with a loud thud. But before he could regain his balance, his legs gave way beneath him and he collapsed onto his knees.

The sikiri released a sound, a cross between a hiss and a roar that made my knees weak. I trusted my instincts and our plan. I acknowledged my fear and used it as fuel to fulfill my purpose, the death of the sikiri.

Without a moment of hesitation, I ran forward, then leapt into the air as the sikiri stood still in confusion. Its thick hide shimmered beneath two moons as I raised my glaive high above me. With all my strength and skill, I aimed for the gap between two scales on the base of its head that Shadow had instructed me to watch out for.

My blade connected with a dull thud, sinking in barely a handspan deep. The momentum of my attack thrust me forward and onto the beast's neck, where I attempted to drive it deeper. As my arms strained against the creature, I felt vibrations begin to resonate through it, then beneath my feet. I suddenly realized what was happening too late – the beast was activating a skill. Its scaly hide began to vibrate faster and faster in a span of less than a second, with an intense hum that threatened to make my ears bleed. I didn't even have the chance to react before my glaive shattered in my hands as it

jerked away from me. Something struck me hard as the sikiri sprung into motion and sent me tumbling backwards, a wet sound of an eruption echoing in my ears. I gasped as I landed heavily on my wrist, feeling it snap in two.

I caught myself and pushed to my knees, holding my side. Sweat broke out all over me as pain throbbed through my wrist. I grabbed the gourd on my waist and quickly drank what little was left inside. The sweet, thick fluid made me forget the pain for just a moment, but it wasn't going to heal me. It wasn't going to make all this pain go away, or anything else. It wasn't that potent, but it couldn't hurt.

Shadow was near me, leaning against a tree with one hand while keeping himself upright by clutching its rough surface. His face was pale and streaked with sweat. He was breathing heavily.

The sikiri was out of the pit, and what was left of it was just an empty hole in front of us. The quicksand had been thrown all around them, it was streaking from the trees and across the ground. The beast was wrapping itself around a tree on the other side of it. I noticed that one side of its head drenched in blood and blind, we had hurt it. Then, it turned its good side toward us, and two golden eyes glared at us.

In the faint light of the moons, I could see the red on its scales, it looked like... like it was growing, expanding. The two golden eyes, had a tint of red in its depths now.

I felt Shadow stir, and glanced at him. He was looking at me, his eyes wide. "It is--"

He didn't get to finish whatever it was that he wanted to say. The tree the sikiri was wrapped around shattered as it squeezed then launched itself across the pit. It was so fast that I barely had the time to turn and look in its direction, and I knew immediately that I had no hope of getting out of the way.

The world turned on its head as I was thrown to the side just as it was about to hit me. A rush of air blew past me as the sikiri struck, the ground cracked and exploded and trees were felled by its passage. I could barely react as I hit the ground, then rolled trying to avoid the falling trees around me.

I raised my head just in time to see that the sikiri had turned around, I still couldn't believe that it could be that fast, and was looking for us. I saw no sign of Shadow, but with his skills he was likely invisible.

My heart was pounding so hard I thought I'd pass out, but somehow I managed to stay conscious. I should've used my [Mist Step] skill, I realized. I shouldn't have needed Shadow to push me out of the way, but skills weren't second nature to me yet, in the chaos I had forgotten. The sikiri had seen me and was coming my way, its movements were jerky, it was obviously exhausted. After all, we had hurt it, just not enough.

It reared up then lashed down with its head. I jumped to the side, knowing that even if I used my skill I wasn't going to be fast enough, and it... missed?

For a moment there was silence, then the noise of cracking branches echoed around us as they began to fall from the force of the

sikiri's attack. It took me a moment to realize that Shadow had to have used his pheromones or a skill to make it appear to the sikiri as if I was in a different place. It took the sikiri a moment more to realize the same.

The sikiri flicked out its tongue and then it shifted towards me, ready to attack. Before it could, Saia swooped down from her hiding place above, her claws outstretched to reach for the creature's head.

She scratched the beast's eye, her powerful claws doing damage, but I didn't see or hear what I expected. She hadn't been able to do damage to the reaper, I doubted that she would be able to harm the sikiri, not on her own at least. She didn't have my strength, even if her drone body was sturdy.

The Sikiri shook its head, then turned and opened its mouth in the direction of Saia flying above it. A skill blasted out, hitting Saia and sending her into a tree with a thud. I took a step forward and pulled out my kabar with my good hand, steeling myself as the Sikiri turned back around.

The fight wasn't even close to over.